Increasing the real life in ourselves

"Increasing the Real Life in Ourselves: Reflections on Norman Mailer's Politics of State."

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In the spring of 1969 Norman Mailer, fresh from his triumphant receipt of the Pulitzer Prize for *The Armies of the Night,* created a media sensation by announcing his entry into the Democratic Primary for the Mayoralty of New York City. The headline-grabbing centrepiece of his campaign was a call for the radical decentralisation of political power culminating in the establishment of the city of New York as the fifty-first state of the Union. Mailer's case for city statehood rested on two main grounds.[1] The first was fiduciary: the fact that New York City existed, he argued, in a relationship of economic peonage to the state of New York meant that it lacked resources sufficient to reverse the continuing collapse of its civic foundations everywhere apparent in widespread urban decay, a stagnant transport system, intensifying pollution, rising crime, deteriorating standards of public education and an accelerating housing crisis. No respite was possible from this pestilential scenario, Mailer melodramatically declared, while the city stood in relation to the federal government "like a sharecropper who lives forever in debt at the company store."[2] Mailer's second argument in support of the decentralisation of political authority was at once more radical and provocative in its conviction that any solution to the civic malaise afflicting New York City first requires the liberation of "life" itself from its subjection to any form of "abstract" or "impersonal" power:

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[1] Mailer presented his views in a political manifesto entitled "Why We Are in New York" published in *The New York Times Magazine on* May 18, 1969.

[2] Mailer, Norman. "Why We Are in New York," quoted in Manso, Peter (ed) *Running Against The Machine: A Grass Roots Race for the New York Mayoralty* (New York: Doubleday, 1969) 6.

> The face of the solution may reside in the notion that the left has been absolutely right on some critical problems of our time and the conservatives have been absolutely correct about one enormous matter - which is that the federal government has no business whatever in local affairs. The style of New York has shifted since the Second World War (along with the rest of the American cities) from a scene of local neighborhoods and personalities to a large dull impersonal style of life which deadens us with its architecture, its highways, its abstract welfare, and its bureaucratic reflex to look for government solutions which come into the city from without (and do not work). So the old confidence that the problems of our life were roughly equal to our abilities has been lost. Our authority has been handed over to the federal power. We expect our economic solutions, our habitats, yes, even our entertainments, to derive from that remote abstract power, remote as the other end of a television tube. We are like wards in an orphan asylum. The shaping of the style of our lives is removed from us - we pay for huge military adventures and social experiments so separated from our direct control that we do not even know where to begin to look to criticize the lack of our power to criticize the lack of our power to criticize. We cannot – the words are now a cliché, the life has gone out of them – we cannot forge our destiny. So our condition is spiritless. We wait for abstract impersonal powers to save us, we despise the abstractness of those powers, we loathe ourselves for our own apathy. Orphans.[3]

Mailer's own political solution to the "spiritless" condition of life in New York City appeared in a policy programme called "Power to the Neighborhoods." The basic tenet of "Power to the Neighborhoods," Mailer explained, was "that any neighbourhood could constitute itself on any principle, whether spiritual, emotional, economical, ideological or idealistic."[4] What Mailer and his running mate, the newspaper columnist Jimmy Breslin, dared the city's inhabitants to imagine was the reinvention of politics as a radical

[3] Mailer, Norman. "Why We Are in New York," 8-9.
[4] Ibid, 12-13.

experiment in self-government in which each neighborhood or community would be afforded the opportunity to take control of its own civic affairs and shape its own way of life. A "neighborhood" in Mailer's sense of the term is not simply a geographical location but rather a zone of becoming irreducible to the undifferentiated unity of the state where we might fashion a style of life in the image of our own desire. Implicit in this vision was the reorganisation of civic space into a patchwork of autonomous zones established upon singular and sometimes wholly incommensurable principles such as the abolition of money or the imposition of a flat tax, anarcho-syndicalist communes or hierarchical rule by a council of elders, the promotion of free love or strict observation of the Ten Commandments. No external restrictions would be placed upon the creation of neighborhood communities; all that mattered was that the constitution of a neighborhood embodied a collective desire for a particular form of life. Even explicitly prejudicial principles such as white supremacy, Mailer insisted, could serve as the basis for civic cohesion if the desire for them proved sufficiently powerful; "If Harlem wanted a statue of Martin Luther King, fine," Michael J Lennon glosses, "if Staten Island wanted one of John Birch, that was okay too."[5] Rather than seeking to prescribe the properly common character of community, Mailer's neighborhood politics looked instead to accentuate the difference *between* social desires and investments in the belief that what he called the vitality or "real life" of our lives is an effect of this internal competition of forces:

> In New York, which is to say, in the twentieth century, one can never know whether the world is vastly more or less violent than it seems. Nor can we discover which actions in our lives are authentic or which belong to the art of the put-on. Conceive that society has come to the point tolerance of others' ideas has no meaning unless there is benumbed acceptance of the fact that we must accept

[5] Lennon, Michael J. *Norman Mailer: A Double Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013) 414-15.

> their lives. If there are young people who believe that human liberty is blockaded until they have the right to take of their clothes in the street – and more! and more! – make love on the hood of an automobile – there are others who think it a sin against the eyes of the Lord to even contemplate the act in one's own mind. Both could now begin to build communities on their separate faith – a spectrum which might run from Compulsory Free Love to Mandatory Attendance in Church on Sunday! Grant us to recognize that wherever there is a common desire among people vital enough to keep a community alive, then there must also be the presence of a clue that some kind of real life resides in the desire. Others may eventually discern how.[6]

Despite the brief flurry of media excitement generated by Mailer's exuberant and iconoclastic insurgency, his challenge for the Democratic candidacy never really came close to achieving mainstream support. Buckling beneath the strain of improvising almost daily policy positions, and continually in thrall to Mailer's temperamental volatility and taste for confrontation, the campaign was unable to sustain its early momentum; when the final results were tallied on June 17, he received little more than 5% of the popular vote. An abiding memory of the final weeks of the campaign is the drunken speech Mailer delivered to a roomful of young party workers in Greenwich Village where, having thanked them for their labours on his behalf in his own inimitable style ("You're just nothing but a bunch of spoiled pigs"), he paused to offer one last defiant exposition of his political ideals:

> What we're running on is this: it has come to the point where this town, that many of us grew up in, the greatest city in the history of the world conceivably, is now some sort of paralytic victim in an orphan asylum or the government

[6] Mailer Norman, "Why We Are in New York," *Running Against the Machine* 13-14.

> syndrome. And if this city is not saved by a vigorous activity by everybody within it. . . . Unless this city turns on and becomes fantastic, it'll become the first victim of the technological society – you know what that means? That means that the smog, the dull air of oppression, will be upon us first, and we will destroy each other first, because we have all have too much within us to be able to bear the unendurable dullness of our days in New York when we all know that we are capable of so much more. So I say this to you. If we don't save our city, our city will become that little ward . . . There will be a fifty-mile bypass around us, and they'll say, "We understand there are three divisions of Marines in there to keep the populace down. . . . We're into somethin' that's deep. Don't kid yourself on this. We're running on the notion of power to the neighbourhoods. . . . We're here on something very simple, which is that nobody knows any longer which idea has more validity than another, because there's no ground, no content, there's no situation for an idea. We're running on one notion. Let the left and the right have their neighbourhoods. Let them each see what kind of society they can create and then decide on the basis of a thousand contests and one hundred bloody encounters, that too, which particular neighbourhood, or style, or conception of life is more interesting than another.[7]

The story of Mailer's failed campaign to be the Democratic candidate for the Mayoralty of New York City is remembered today, if at all, as a minor footnote to a literary career which lasted almost sixty years. In the remarks that follow, however, I want to suggest that far from representing an eccentric and seemingly inexplicable detour from Mailer's literary work, his Mayoral campaign is continuous with some of his work's most vital and enduring

[7] Quoted in Flaherty, Joe, *Managing Mailer* (London: Michael Joseph, 1970) 116-117.

concerns. Mailer did not, upon this account, first enter state politics in 1969; instead *all* of his work is a form of state politics insofar as the very idea of the state crystallises the conflict between different powers and potentialities of self-production which came to define his broader "existential" vision. What makes Mailer's apparently eccentric style of neighborhood politics central to this vision is the way it connects the question of state formation in general to the operation of a power of transcendence which is indistinguishable from "totalitarianism" in his own idiosyncratic and infamous sense of the term. In order to consider some of the implications of Mailer's imbrication of state formation with the operation of transcendent and totalitarian power, I want to return his neighborhood politics to its origin in the Nietzschean turn of his thinking in the early 1950s. My hope is that reconsidering Mailer's legacy in this way may illuminate both the promise and the potential perils of his distinctive conception of the politics of everyday life which achieved its most visible incarnation in his New York Mayoral campaign.

At this point a question irresistibly presents itself: what does it mean to say that for Mailer the formation of the state necessarily involves the operation of "transcendent" and "totalitarian" power? To answer this question I want briefly to invoke a number of concepts employed by Deleuze and Guattari in their social ontology of the emergence of the state form. For Deleuze and Guattari the evolution of the state is synonymous with the transition from immanent to transcendent modes of power which occurs when a particular force is generated from *within* relations of power that comes to organise relations of power in *general*. Thus in primitive communities power operates immanently through collective practices of marking and scarring which connect individual bodies into a tribal body. These primitive operations of power produce a "surplus value" in the form of pain which in turn creates habits of memory; this surplus value is then recirculated throughout the community to produce the "socius" or collective memory of the tribe. A crucial shift in the evolution of

power occurs when the circulation of pain *between* bodies is made to serve the pleasure of a *particular* body (the despot) which elevates itself above the community by establishing itself as an external or transcendent figure of law outside the chain of tribal connection. In despotic regimes power is no longer conceived immanently; instead it is grounded upon a transcendental body or law. What we see in the emergence of despotic command, Deleuze and Guattari contend, is an embryonic version of modern state power which establishes and conserves its authority through the combined techniques of transcendence (the subjection of life to some differentiating or organising power), "despotic signification" (the elevation of one regime of meaning to stand in for the whole) and "overcoding" (conducing the social circulation of sense to conform to this despotic regime of signification). The effects of this new distribution of power are diffused throughout the body politic by techniques including the management of public spaces and the regulation of relations between bodies, the moralisation of desire and the subjection of the living time of labour to the productivity principle, increasing interpenetration of governmental, corporate and media elites, and the "securitization" or circumscription of political life by the defensive needs of the state. A further radicalisation of power within and beyond the state form takes place in contemporary or postmodern capitalism when these external principles of transcendence and overcoding are reinscribed within the immanent flow of capital itself which now decodes all codes and determines all values by affirming its own quantitative self-extension as the general law of life.[8]

Mailer's preoccupation with the transcendence of power is evident from his earliest writing. The regnant theme of his work from the late 1940s onwards is the overcoding or systemic domination of American life by the nexus of newly emerging forms of monopoly capitalism and the burgeoning military-industrial-corporate complex of the National Security State.

[8] Colebrook, Claire. *Understanding Deleuze* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2002) 126.

Each of his first three novels dramatizes the way horizontal affective relations between individuals potentially capable of producing a new democratic common are vertically recalibrated to perpetuate a model of social production predicated upon the transcendence of a permanent war economy and the sectional interests of a political-corporate elite. Mailer further extends his critique of mechanisms of social control by exploring power at both a macro- and micropolitical level. Nowhere is this double focus more clearly expressed than in the dystopian vision of an incipient fascist phase of post-war American culture unfolded in *The Naked and The Dead* which locates the threat to democratic values in both the ideological circumscription of the domestic public sphere by the "power concentration" of the military-industrial-corporate elite and the systemic redirection of individual perception and response to conformist and reactionary ends. At the macropolitical level Mailer's portrait of the local Army commander General Cummings artfully anticipates the relentless convergence of military, corporate and political power by presenting him as a prototype of the modern corporate executive whose interests and investments are already synonymous with those of the representative political class: "His expression when he smiled was very close to the ruddy, hard and complacent appearance of any number of American senators and businessmen, but the tough good-guy aura never quite remained. There was a certain vacancy in his face, like the vacancy of actors who play American congressmen" (2006: 89). Elsewhere in the predominating structure of the "fear ladder" that underpins Cummings' repressive regime, Mailer foreshadows the emergence of a new micropolitics of power which operates directly upon the body at the affective and pre-political level to produce physical reactions that lead in turn to reactionary ideological investments. By relentlessly subjecting his men to a transcendent and overpowering terror Cummings aims both to dissolve their existing bonds of social solidarity (exemplified by their willingness to turn upon one another and collude with established authority in order to save their own skin and

protect their own private interests) and inculcate in them a reactive identification with the power that oppresses them. A fearful body of men, he realises, is all too ready to cede its autonomy to the power that offers it protection; its absolute law of life becomes the desperate desire to defend itself from the continual threat of terror. Each level of the "fear ladder" is designed to convert response into reactive reflex by pumping fear into the heart of the social body; "After it went on long enough," Cummings's antagonist Lieutenant Hearn mournfully reflects, "the reactions would become automatic, fear-inspired" (2006: 318). Mailer's next two novels, *Barbary Shore* (1951) and *The Deer Park* (1955), anatomise the triumph of precisely such a micropolitics of fear in the rise of "McCarthyism" which works explicitly to reinforce the hegemony of the military-industrial-corporate complex by reducing civic self-reflection to a paranoid fixation with patriotism, "American values" and the defence of National Security.

Mailer's work in the nine long years between the publication of his third and fourth novels is marked by a major transformation in his attitude to power. This change reveals itself in the (in)famous critique of the intensifying "totalitarianism" of modern American culture elaborated in his two works of speculative non-fiction *Advertisements for Myself* (1961) and *The Presidential Papers* (1964). Given the murderous history of totalitarianism in the twentieth-century the attention Mailer's remarks have received is unsurprising, although it should be said that his use of the term was never really intended to suggest that America was upon the brink of becoming a political dictatorship or one-party state on the Nazi or Soviet model. The difficulty in deciding how to respond to Mailer's dystopian vision lays in the bewildering array of phenomena he adduces as evidence of the totalitarian spirit of modern American life. "There's a totalitarian *Geist,* a spirit, which takes many forms, has many manifestations," he observed in a 1961 interview, a spirit whose manifestations by the end of *The Presidential Papers* include the military-industrial complex, the FBI, the culture

industry of mass commodity capitalism, the welfare programmes of the New Deal, the built space of modern urban environments, shopping malls, muzak, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, pacifism, Planned Parenthood, taped television, antibiotics, Sigmund Freud and Mahatma Ghandhi (1965: 126). Confronted by a charge-sheet as seemingly indiscriminate as this, it is not immediately apparent what principle of force might unite these phenomena and prevent Mailer's discussion of "totalitarianism" from collapsing into incoherence.

In fact what may look like incoherence is really the visible sign of a fundamental shift in Mailer's thinking from an ideological to a voluntarist conception of power. As I suggested, Mailer's critique of totalitarianism begins in the late 1940s and 1950s as a response to the threat posed to democratic values by the Cold War ideology of anti-communism which reorganised the life of the republic around a politics of national security enacted in the interests of a shadow government constituted by reactionary elites and the emerging nexus of the military-industrial-corporate complex. The adjective "totalitarian" in this context refers both to the privatisation of political power by elite institutions and interests and the totalising nature of national security culture reflected in bipartisan commitment to the anti-communist politics of the new Cold War. A crucial transition in Mailer's understanding of totalitarianism starts to take place when his critique of Cold War political culture was supplemented by his account of the technological colonisation of our inner life by the electronic circuits of a new mass media which reconfigures our affective responses to reflect the commercial imperatives of the market mechanism. At this point Mailer's focus switches perceptibly from the outer to the inner world: if totalitarianism begins for him in the subjection of life to an external power of transcendence, this power is reproduced and extended at the interior and affective level in the subject who, numbed and devitalised by the monotony and indifference of a cultural sphere in which every object reveals the

universal imprint of the social system that produced it, relinquishes his individuality and makes himself over in the image of the forces that define him. The triumph of totalitarianism in ostensibly democratic societies consists in Mailer's view in precisely in this capacity of systems of power to work concertedly at the affective and pre-reflective level to produce reactive identifications with established forms of authority. Mailer's response to this totalitarian threat is to try to step outside the self-reinforcing circuits of subjective conformity by elaborating a voluntarist and "existential" mode of self-fashioning which seeks to overcome the reactive and dominated element in our natures by affirming our own most vital and creative powers.

The outline of Mailer's voluntarist vision of power may be glimpsed in his recurring reflections upon the economy of forces at the very heart of life:

> One has to keep coming come back one notion: How do you make life? How do you *not* make life? You have to assume, just as a working stance, that life is probably good – if it isn't good, then our existence is such an absurdity that *any* action immediately becomes absurd – but if you assume that life is good, then you have to assume that those things which keep life from happening – which tend to make life more complex without becoming more useful, more stimulating – are bad. Anything that tends to make a man a machine without giving him the power to increase the real life in himself is bad (1970: 139).

Mailer is unequivocal here that the value of life lies in the actualisation of a potentiality to increase what he calls the "real life" in ourselves. But how are we to understand the evaluative distinction he makes here between what he calls "life" and "real life"? The best way of elucidating this distinction is to relocate it within the economy of active and reactive forces that underpins Nietzsche's philosophy of life as will to power. Rather than beginning

from a notion of identity or what something *is,* Nietzsche's philosophy provides a genealogical critique of *becoming* or how bodies are composed. It is not the case, Nietzsche argues, that some bodies are simply more powerful than other bodies and therefore in a position of being able to enslave them; instead, it is from an active struggle *between* bodies that one body establishes itself in relation to another body. Identity and power in this scenario are always the effect of active relations or an open antagonism between bodies. At the same time, some bodies, instead of merely accepting a life of action and open antagonism, develop an *interpretation* of life which seeks to justify their relatively subordinate position within an existing economy of forces by reversing the relation between action and identity. It is because a body acts, Nietzsche contends, that it becomes masterful; but *weaker* or *slavish* forces rationalise their relative powerlessness by claiming that the reason for their inaction is that they have first been weakened or enslaved. At the core of Nietzsche's genealogical critique is the belief that *every* type of body – the biological body, the state body politic, the body of ideas exemplified by a particular system of values - is constituted by a ceaseless conflict between unequal and antagonistic forces. In Gilles Deleuze's deft summary:

> Every force is related to others and it either obeys or commands. What defines a body is this relation between dominant and dominated forces. Every relationship of forces constitutes a body whether it is chemical, biological, sociological, or political. Any two forces, being unequal, constitute a body as soon as they enter into a relationship. That is why the body is always the fruit of chance, in the Nietzschean sense, and appears as the most "astonishing" thing, much more astonishing, in fact, than consciousness and spirit. But chance, the relation of force, is also the essence of force. The birth of a living body is not therefore surprising since every body is living, being the arbitrary product of the

> forces of what it is composed. Being composed of a plurality of irreducible forces the body is a multiple phenomenon, its unity is that of a multiple phenomenon, a "unity of domination." In a body the superior or dominant forces are known as *active* and the inferior or dominated forces are known as *reactive*. Active and reactive forces are precisely the original qualities which express the relation of force with force.[9]

An active force in the Nietzschean sense is a force that goes to the limit of what it can do by actualising the potentialities implicit in its own mode of becoming. Conversely, a reactive force is an inferior or dominated force that is separated from what it can do by an interior limit or blockage. In order to preserve themselves from the active forces that surround and surpass them, reactive forces work to separate active forces from what they can do by recomposing the world in the image of their own inferior power. To accomplish this goal they invent ideas about life such as morality, law, and religion, which work to circumscribe the power of active forces by redirecting them to known and conformable ends. Nietzsche's call for a "revaluation of values" follows from his argument that the values we have – such as the opposition between good and evil or between the proper and improper – are *already* the result of a prior valuation: rather than simply asserting their own desire weaker forces make the reactive claim that there is "a" value (such as the good) in whose name we ought to act. This revaluation of life in the interests of circumscribed and regulated forms of life is another name for the *becoming-reactive* of forces. The triumph of reactive forces is also accomplished in those moments when we take satisfaction from the obstruction of our own desires, make others responsible for our own feelings of powerlessness, and reconfigure our own impoverished experience of being into a positive image of life. What reveals itself to us

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[9] Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche's Philosophy* trans Hugh Tomlinson (1983;London: Athlone, 1996) 40.

in this becoming-reactive of forces is the figure of *ressentiment,* a type who takes revenge upon life by deriving value from its inability to *actualise* its own most vital desires.

The effects of the Nietzschean turn in Mailer's thought become clear in a number of ways. The first is his embrace of a singular version of existentialism. Mailer had little interest, it should be said, in existentialism as a formal or systematic philosophy; instead existentialism in his sense of the term expresses his resistance to the transcendence of power or the subjection of life to an outside order or value. To adopt an "existential" attitude for Mailer is to open ourselves to an experience of life as absolute contingency liberated from any supervening code or moral belief; this movement beyond transcendence returns life to its origin in the antagonistic struggle between active and reactive forces. To live existentially therefore requires us to shape a style of existence which enables us to affirm our own most active and creative forces by separating them from the reactive and transcendent forces which seek to diminish their vitality. Mailer underscores what is at stake in his existential vision of life as a ceaseless conflict of active and reactive forces in the political physiology of the American state with which he begins *The Presidential Papers:*

> Politics is like a body of organs. When the body is sick, it is usually because one or other organ has become too weak or too powerful in its function. If the disproportion is acute, a war goes on in the body, an inflammatory sickness, a fever, a crisis. The war decided, the organ subsides, different in size, stronger or weaker, it returns to its part of the body's function. Acute disease is cure. It is the war which initiates a restoration of balance. It has features, symptoms, results. Acute diseases are like political forces personified by heroes. And slack diseases, featureless, symptomless diseases like virus and colds and the ubiquitous cancer are the appropriate metaphor of all those political forces like

> the FBI, or like the liberalism of the Democratic Party, which are historically featureless (1965: 7).

Already present in this enigmatic passage from the early 1960s is the connection between state formation and the existential economy of active and reactive forces which subsequently exerts such a profound influence upon Mailer's idea of "neighborhood" politics. Here as elsewhere in Mailer's writing of this period the "sickness" of the body politic is explicitly linked to the effects of transcendence or the becoming-reactive of force that occurs when the life of the body politic is subjected to a general law or power such as the intensifying need for "oversecurity" and ideological conformity inculcated within us by the regulatory mechanisms of the National Security State. Such techniques of ideological manipulation and coercion are for Mailer "featureless" or "slack" diseases because by subjecting the body of the individual to a general power of transcendence they deny the active competition of forces which might produce a "higher" vision of life. Sharpening the terms of his physiological allegory of politics as a body of organs, Mailer describes the becoming-reactive of forces as a form of *cancer* which drains the body of its vitality and power of active self-differentiation through the over-production of the same. What Mailer calls here the "ubiquitous cancer" is therefore a "disease which is not a disease" in the merely cellular or corporeal sense but symbolises instead a "loss of self" or existential vitality wherein the "cells refuse to accept the will, the dignity, the desire, in short the *project* of the person who contains them" (1965: 205). The onset of this existential cancer manifests itself in the desire to conform to the prescriptive platitudes of established power, the urge to seek anonymous security in the sterile dogmatism of conventional opinion, and the willingness to internalise that "wave of the undifferentiated function" which synchronises social libido to the rhythms of commodity production (1970: 23). The only effective remedy for this cancerous corruption of the individual and collective body, Mailer concludes, is a war *within* the body

which might reveal the qualitative difference between its active and reactive elements. The purpose of this existential war is therefore to return the transcendence of power to the plane of immanence by materialising the competition of forces at the very heart of life.

Mailer's political physiology of the American state also reveals two developments in his thinking which would have an enduring effect upon the next phase of his work: his voluntarist critique of liberalism and his commitment to the redemptive personality of the existential hero. He underscores his hostility to liberalism in the claim that the "liberalism of the Democratic party" is riddled with the same "ubiquitous cancer" that contaminates "political forces like the FBI." While this hostility may be partly explained by the historic complicity of strands of American liberal thought with the Cold War politics of the National Security State, Mailer's denunciation of what he came to call "liberal totalitarianism" went far beyond the immediate context of the Cold War to encompass Lyndon Johnson's ameliorative vision of the "Great Society," collective programmes of welfare provision, and liberal commitment to the expanding movement for Civil Rights. At the core of Mailer's anti-liberalism is his identification of liberalism *tout court* with a culture of life-management that strives to abolish the distinction between active and reactive forces in the name of a general equality of powers. For this reason the representative modern liberal in Mailer's eyes is a "technologue" or denizen of "Technology Land," one of those "natural managers of that future air-conditioned vault where the last of human life would still exist" (1994: 15). Modern liberalism is technological in its essence because both "liberalism" and "technology" are synonymous for him with the subordination of life to "that social machine of the future in which all irrational human conflict would be resolved, all conflict of interest negotiated, and nature's resonance condensed into frequencies which could comfortably phase nature in or out as you please" (1994: 16). Liberalism in Mailer's sense of the term therefore embodies the transcendence of power in the form of a "concept" of planned and managed life which is

currently "converting the citizenry into a plastic mass" by abolishing the qualitative distinction between levels of force which might engender a different human future. Because liberal "Technology Land" is for Mailer the culmination of an entire reactive vision of life, its effects may discerned in forms as various as the suburb (planned living in the service of the corporate state), pacifism (abolition of the will to dominate), psychoanalysis (management and regulation of the drives in the name of normalised life) and bourgeois morality (life judged from the perspective of civilised rules and norms). In each of these forms desire and force become limited by their own productions as life is regulated from above by a general organising power or ethos.

Throughout the 1960s Mailer's resistance to the sterile homogeneity of modern liberal "Technology Land" expressed itself in his growing sympathy for the agrarian and radically individualist strain of conservative thought which perceived in the centralising force of the state "some almost palpable conspiracy to tear life away from its roots" (1965: 167). In Mailer's view the pronounced anti-collectivist impulses of right-wing politics made it considerably more sensitive than most other political traditions to the totalitarian plague bedevilling contemporary American culture; indeed "it is precisely this sensitivity which gives power to the Right Wing's passions" (1965: 165). Yet at the same time right-wing politics also exhibits its own totalitarian tendencies in its concerted support for the "war machine" of the National Security State and the anti-communist hysteria of the McCarthy years (1965: 171). All too aware of this conservative paradox, Mailer's relentless opposition to the cancer of totalitarianism gradually became imbricated with the desire to rescue authentic conservatism from its own reactive investment in the transcendence of power. For this to take place the conservative mind must come to recognise that neither individual liberty nor republican virtue is possible while it continues to sustain the permanent war economy: "So long as there is a cold war, there cannot be a conservative administration in

America" (1965: 170). As we have seen, however, the principal focus of Mailer's anti-totalitarian politics is not to redeem conservatism from its own reactive tendencies; instead its real object is to recover an idea of the *political as such* from the subjection of political life to the organising power of the state. He ultimately discovered this idea in his idiosyncratic conception of *Left Conservatism.* What Mailer sought in Left Conservatism was to reinvent politics as an *agon* or a competition between antagonistic and opposed forces which might identify and affirm the active element implicit within each constituent tradition. From this perspective the leftist tendency in Mailer's thinking works explicitly to liberate flows of social energy routinely blocked by conservatism's corrupting predisposition to hierarchies of caste and class and the penetration of corporate power into the very heart of the state; meanwhile the conservative tendency steadfastly opposes these egalitarian flows at the point where they begin to congeal into a political technology of life-management by reimagining power as an immanent force which operates within and between bodies across a particular space or territory.

Rather than being seen as a mere synthesis of Leftist and Rightist ideological investments, Mailer's "Left Conservatism" should be understood as an immanent mode of critique which, refusing the political illusions of transcendence, envisages life from the standpoint of the action and reaction of forces. Against this background the project of a properly ant-totalitarian politics becomes to expose the "wound from culture itself"- the buried memory of the origin of culture in the conflict between active and reactive forces – by *materialising* this concept in the name of creating other possibilities of life (1965: 186). It is this project Mailer describes by the phrase "existential politics." At the heart of Mailer's existential politics is the figure of the "existential hero," a charismatic and larger than life character capable of embodying the event of creative force by which we might produce ourselves in the image of our own desire. Mailer's celebration of the existential hero is a direct response

to the loss of personality afflicting American life in "our most dear and subtle totalitarian time, the time of conformity (1970: 18). This loss of personality manifests itself in a variety of forms including the tendency of modern commodity capitalism to create "men as interchangeable as commodities," the "totalitarianization of the psyche by the stultifying techniques of the mass media," and the "incredible dullness wreaked upon the American landscape in Eisenhower's eight years" reflected in the "triumph of the corporation" and the suburbanization of the American mind (1965: 39, 43). These deleterious developments have their roots, Mailer suggests in the gradual disconnection of American life from the existential labour of self-transformation symbolised by nineteenth-century frontier culture. The remorseless extirpation of this existential frontier spirit by the sterile conformism of modern culture produces a schism in the national imagination captured by Mailer in his famous image of the two rivers of American life:

> Since the First World War Americans have been leading a double life and our history has moved on two rivers, one visible, the other underground; there has been the history of politics, which is concrete, factual, practical and unbelievably dull if not for the consequences of some of these men; and there is a subterranean river of untapped, ferocious and lonely desires, that concentration of ecstasy and violence which is the dream life of the nation (1965: 38-39).

The task of the existential hero is to recover the force of this subterranean river by personifying an image of American life as a dangerous and potentially liberating adventure in self-creation inimical to the homogenizing pressures of the mass media, the corporation and the suburb. Mailer's existential politics is rooted in the concept of the hero precisely because "the hero is the one kind of man who never develops by accident" but instead actively fashions himself through a "consecutive set of brave and witty self-creations" (1965:

6). Totalitarianism for Mailer is a "cancer" or "symptomless disease" precisely because it seeks to subordinate life's powers of emergence or becoming to a general force or law; this is the reason why "power without a face is the disease of the state." The existential hero, on the other hand, renounces the facelessness of power by turning politics back into an *argument,* asserting the pre-eminence of a particular style of life, and, in so doing, reaffirming the competition of forces that lies at the origin of every structure, law or value.

Both Mailer's singular conception of existential politics and his insistence that life only becomes valuable when it is experienced as self-overcoming lie at the heart of his New York mayoral campaign. Against this background his radical demand for statehood for New York City begins not in a mere appeal for the devolution of economic resources and responsibilities but rather in resistance to the subjection of life to a general organising power which presents itself as the origin of force of law. As Mailer's core programme of "Power to the Neighborhoods" makes clear, the reinvention of the state in the terms he intends always also encompasses a metaphysical quest for new and transformed states of being predicated upon the action and reaction of forces. A "neighborhood," Mailer repeatedly emphasises, is not a *concept;* it is an embodied and material form of life organised around the internal differentiation of forces. For Mailer neighborhoods inscribe the competition of forces within the marrow of everyday experience; the existential challenge for each of us is to separate active from reactive force by developing a style of life which embodies and projects a positive vision of what we would most wish to become.

In the same spirit Mailer's assumption of the directly public persona of Mayoral candidate embodied his unswerving belief in the role of the artist as the existential hero of culture. The role of the artist as existential hero, he consistently maintains, is to underscore the dynamic and creative dimension of culture by cultivating a mode of personality which inscribes this

potentiality for self-creation at the very core of its being. The artist must then project this existential image *outwards* onto the body politic by waging a public war against the repression and rationalisation of the active force of life by totalitarian forms of power. Mailer's elaboration of a "neighborhood" politics, his repeated forays into public debates about political rights, social morality and the technological circumscription of culture, his habitual recourse to tropes of violence and war to describe the existential war of self-formation, and his insistent privileging of the spontaneous, sensuous and instinctive element of experience should each be seen as attempts to revitalise life by reconnecting it to the differential play forces that expresses the becoming of being itself. To say this is also to say that we only grasp the existential lesson of Mailer's Mayoral campaign when we see it as an expression of his commitment to see law, morality and value as the effect of the immanent level of forces rather than the expression of some underlying law or power. Or, as he phrased the matter himself in *The Presidential Papers,"* I think I would be in favor of legislation whose inner tendency would be to weaken the bonds of legislation" (1965: 11).

It should also be said, in conclusion, that the metaphysical and political privilege Mailer confers upon the active element in force is also the source of some of the abiding problems which beset his work. Thus while Mailer's refusal of transcendence and his voluntarist stress upon the plane of immanence extends an image of life as constant change, creation and self-overcoming, the ethical vagary of the claim that an active force is defined by its capacity to go to the limit of what it can do produces a series of reactionary investments which become indistinguishable from his broader cultural vision. As Mailer's earlier reference to the "totalitarian" character of social programmes like Planned Parenthood suggests, these investments appear most notoriously in his attitude to contemporary sexual politics and reproductive technologies. One reason why Mailer's work becomes fascinated by the nature and structure of libidinal economies following his Nietzschean turn in the

early 1950s is that sexual desire affords him the ultimate example of an immanent force capable of engendering new and infinitely different forms of life. Conversely, he habitually condemns as totalitarian in its essence anything which prevents this force from extending and reproducing itself to create new events and forms of life. Several of the reactionary excrescences which disfigure Mailer's work – such as his characteristic repudiation of all forms of reproductive technology as repressive life-management or his terrifying insistence that "It's better to commit rape than masturbate" – stem from his undiscriminating tendency to transform undifferentiated flows of immanent becoming into an absolute criterion of existential value (1965: 140).

Mailer's often undiscriminating valorisation of active force also fatefully compromises his response to the politics of race. As his seminal essay "The White Negro" makes abundantly clear, his developing conception of existential politics is marked from its inception by an almost mystical reverence for the force and potency of "black" existence. Revealingly, Mailer's imaginative investment in black experience in this piece does not appear as the inevitable corollary of political solidarity with the social plight of an oppressed and marginalised grouping; instead he transforms the negative fact of black exclusion from social power into the existential basis of an active, affirmative and continually self-transforming style of life. Mailer is attracted to the idea of racial minorities because they seem to exist in a state of radical flux ungoverned by a dominant image or identity; because of this attraction his work is always on the point of transforming them into metaphors for a mode of existence lived at the level of the immanent power of becoming before it is incorporated into a general or "categorical" social code.[10] However, a recurrent weakness of

[10] "But the Negro, not being privileged to gratify his self-esteem with the heady satisfaction of categorical condemnation, chose to move instead in that other direction where all situations are equally valid, and in the worst of perversion, promiscuity, pimpery, drug-addiction, rape, razor-slash, bottle-break, what-have-you, the Negro discovered and elaborated a morality of the bottom, an

Mailer's critique of power is that his radical antipathy to collective or normative expressions of identity blinds him to the catalysing role of social movements in contesting repressive institutional and ideological formations; as his characteristically scattershot denunciations of Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" demonstrate, he is resolutely scornful of social demands which require systemic or programmatic solutions. A case in point, as I suggested earlier, is Mailer's consistently ambivalent response to the political campaign for Civil Rights. Always suspicious of what he perceives to be the reactive element in force contained by appeals to equal or undifferentiated rights, Mailer's idiosyncratic response to this struggle is to reinterpret it as an existential rite of passage rather than as a political crusade for rights and recognition in the hope of obscuring its historical and structural dependence upon the "liberal center" he routinely excoriates (1965: 26). Consequently Martin Luther King is reborn in Mailer's writing as an existential hero stripped of any vital relation to the network of left-liberal and ecclesiastical movements which helped sustain him; it comes as little surprise when barely four months after King's assassination Mailer reports that he was already "getting tired of Negroes and their rights" (1971: 50).

Two short years later Mailer's unassuaged hostility to any force or structure which might limit what he saw as the "real life" in ourselves would reach a very public climax in the debates and controversies surrounding his polemical intervention into the struggle for female liberation *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971). Perhaps because of the urgency of the social issues involved, perhaps because of the combustibility of the personalities at the core of the fiercest exchanges, Mailer's defiantly iconoclastic insistence that life only becomes valuable when redeemed from technological enclosure made him once more notorious in the public imagination. And yet, as I hope to have indicated, everything that was crucial to this debate,

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ethical differentiation between the good and the bad in every human activity from the go-getter pimp (as opposed to the lazy one) to the relatively dependent pusher or prostitute." *Advertisements for Myself* 280.

everything that made it both necessary and inevitable to the shaping of Mailer's preferred style of life, was already at the centre of Mailer's doomed campaign for the mayoralty of New York City in the early summer of 1969.

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